

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**  
**JACK O'CONNELL**, State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
1430 N Street, Suite 5602  
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901  
916-319-0800

**CALIFORNIA STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**THEODORE R. MITCHELL**, President  
1430 N Street, Suite 5111  
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901  
916-319-0827

**OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION**  
**GLEN W. THOMAS**, Secretary of Education  
1121 L Street, Suite 600  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
916-323-0611

December 14, 2009

Dear County and District Superintendents and Charter School Administrators:

We are writing to invite your participation in the State's application for federal funding under the Race to the Top initiative. As you are aware, Race to the Top offers an unprecedented opportunity to build on our progress to date and invest in a partnership between the State and local educational agencies (LEAs) to strengthen schools and close the achievement gap. In a previous letter you received via e-mail on November 25, we outlined initial information on the State's application. In this letter, given that a key element of California's application is the explicit inclusion of LEAs that want to partner with the State, we provide you information on the key elements that will be included in California's State plan as well as the final Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that is required for participation in California's Race to the Top. We will need your MOUs returned by January 8, 2010; we apologize for this short and challenging timeframe, but such urgency is necessary in order to deliver this application by its due date of January 19, 2010. We hope that by providing you with this information, you will be able to hold the necessary conversations with the key stakeholders in your LEA in order to determine if it is possible for your LEA to participate in this application.

Race to the Top offers an opportunity to strategically build upon our current efforts and invest in key supports that 1) refine our current rigorous state standards; 2) provide new supports for teachers and principals aimed at improving effectiveness; 3) enhance local data systems and coordinate those systems with state data systems; and 4) dramatically improve the State's persistently lowest-achieving schools. Participating LEAs will need to commit to partnering with the State in implementing each of these four key reform areas in the attached MOU. We want to underscore the point that this application – while requiring concerted attention to key reform areas – is grounded in local flexibility and innovation in order to determine how best to define and implement reform elements that strengthen teaching and learning. The State is committed to providing the flexibility necessary for local innovation and then to ensure successes are broadly available as a best practice. This way we are all engaged together in an effort to ensure that local expertise can be leveraged to build new models and dramatically improve student achievement.

The attached MOU must be signed by the LEA superintendent (or an equivalent authorized signatory) and, as the State application has a greater chance of winning if

MOUs are signed by all parties, will preferably also be signed by the president of your local governing board (or an equivalent authorized signatory) and the local teachers union leader (or an equivalent authorized signatory if applicable).

To give you a sense of what the overall State plan will address, we outline below the key elements that we expect California's Race to the Top plan to include.

### **Rationale for the State Plan**

California's diverse demographics and ongoing leadership in innovation make us an important exemplar in efforts to embrace both the challenges and the unique potential that frame the future of American education. Our state includes some of the most diverse and innovative school and district practices in the nation. If all our students were educated to the high standards we have set for them, our workforce would be uniquely positioned to compete effectively in a culturally diverse global marketplace. Yet California, like the rest of the nation, struggles to ensure all of our students are adequately prepared.

California's Race to the Top application will be built on a strong history of education reform that is grounded in some of the highest standards in the country. Despite the State's commitments and successes to date, progress must be accelerated and expanded. California's budget crisis brings the state to a crossroads: to thwart reform efforts or to use it as an opportunity to focus on priority supports for closing achievement gaps? Race to the Top represents our state's best chance to engage in the fundamental reforms that are needed to develop our workforce and fuel future innovations—to invest in state and local systems that will accelerate and drive growth in student achievement.

We need to use our creativity, leavened by the Race to the Top award, to build a new way of running the educational enterprise in California. This new system must be less hierarchical and more collaborative, student-centered rather than adult-centric, data driven with mutual accountability at all levels, and must leverage our expertise in all things technological for which California is known throughout the world to undergird our efforts. This system will require that the State and LEAs redefine their working relationships. The State role must transition from that of regulating inputs and monitoring processes to one of setting and maintaining world-class standards, providing assistance and leveraging best practices, and monitoring outcomes in a way that fosters continuous improvement at all levels. The local role will need to be one of leadership and innovation. Districts can use Race to the Top funding as a means to develop new approaches that can lead our state and the nation. That is why we are committed as a state leadership team to win this competition—not just for the needed additional resources, but because those resources will help us pay for reforms that we all believe will improve student learning, close our pernicious achievement gaps, reduce dropout

rates and result in significantly more high school graduates who are well-prepared for success in college and careers.

It is because of this commitment that we believe all LEAs who join us in this effort can and must agree to all of the reform areas and expectations laid out in our MOU. This effort is too important to continue our work in silos. By banding together and working collaboratively, we can find success together. This work will not be easy, and we will all have to break out of some traditional boxes that have held us back in the past. By joining as a group of committed educators, focused as a team on providing the opportunity for all of our children to reach their potential, we know we can win this race.

### **Standards and Assessments**

Recognizing California's national leadership in setting and implementing state standards, California has agreed to participate in the development of a set of common core standards. The State intends to adopt the national common core standards by August 2, 2010 in such a manner as to not lower our rigorous expectations for students. The State also intends to join a multi-state consortium to develop aligned assessments. This process will include a chain of state supports for the transition to revised state standards and assessments, which will include:

- Adopt revised curriculum frameworks in English-language arts by January 2011 and in mathematics by June 2011 in a way that includes an analytic process to combine common core standards with California's current standards;
- Offer professional development on the frameworks;
- Adopt new instructional materials for English-language arts in spring 2012 and mathematics in spring 2013;
- Revise assessments for implementation in English-language arts in spring 2014 and mathematics in spring 2015; and
- Revise the state accountability system as needed to align with new standards and assessments by 2015.

In addition, the State also intends to develop and adopt a new accountability model that is based upon demonstrating individual year-to-year student achievement gains. Participating LEAs in Race to the Top, will pilot the new student growth accountability model in the 2010–11 school year to inform instruction and supports for teachers and leaders. As part of that process, LEAs participating in Race to the Top will have priority in participating in professional development in using data from the new growth model.

Furthermore, the State will seek federal approval to allow participating LEAs to pilot the new model in lieu of the current federal accountability Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measures. The State also envisions a revision of the Academic Performance Index (API) to incorporate the new student-level growth data.

LEAs that choose to participate in Race to the Top will agree to:

- Inform State decisions about adopting the common core standards;
- Inform the State in its transition to statewide implementation of the common core standards;
- Offer professional development related to new state curriculum; and
- Pilot a new student growth accountability model that could possibly replace school and district AYP models (pending federal approval).

### **Data Systems to Support Instruction**

As part of Race to the Top, the State will work to improve the statewide longitudinal data system and its ability to communicate with local data systems. In this partnership, the State intends to:

- Connect K–12 data to higher education and workforce data in order to provide LEAs information about what happens to students once they leave their schools.
- Provide access to best practices throughout the state.

In addition, the State asks that participating LEAs commit to implementing or enhancing local data systems, including to:

- Implement/enhance and use a local instructional improvement system (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and listed in Attachment 2 of this letter);
- Collaborate with the State on reporting data elements such as teacher and student absences, student ACT/SAT scores, and other elements agreed to as part of the Race to the Top partnership;
- Commit to the use of formative assessments (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and listed in Attachment 2 of this letter) that are aligned to state standards (if your district does not already do so) and/or draw upon a proposed

state item bank of formative assessment items if desired, all to collect and use data to inform instruction;

- Make data from the instructional improvement system available to researchers pending appropriate local approval of such data requests in order to ensure the protection of student and employee rights to privacy;
- Offer professional development for teachers and school leaders on using data to improve instruction.

### **Great Teachers and Leaders**

We recognize that a fundamental step for closing achievement gaps is ensuring our most challenging schools are staffed with effective teachers and school leaders. We are asking participating LEAs to partner with the State to strengthen supports for teachers and school leaders, including deepening teacher and principal evaluations to both strengthen instruction and manage talent. In this partnership, the State intends to:

- Facilitate a collaborative process with teacher unions and other state-level education management organizations to design model teacher and principal evaluations that use multiple measures, including student achievement growth data as a significant factor;
- Facilitate and encourage LEAs to develop their own teacher and principal evaluation models or use the models developed through the State's collaborative processes that incorporate information from multiple measures of teacher and principal performance including student achievement growth (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and listed in Attachment 2 of this letter) as a significant factor;
- Evaluate preparation programs for teachers and leaders drawing on student achievement and student growth data that is linked to the students' teachers and principals and the programs where those teachers and principals were prepared;
- Encourage and assist LEAs in ensuring the equitable and fair distribution of effective teachers and principals (as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and listed in Attachment 2 of this letter); and
- Invest in programs to prepare and provide ongoing, job-embedded support for school leaders and teachers, including an effort targeted specifically to school turnaround leaders.

Participating LEAs will commit to:

- Design and implement teacher and principal evaluation systems (or refine the State's model evaluation systems noted above) that use multiple measures, including student achievement growth data as a significant factor;
- Conduct annual evaluations of teachers and principals; these evaluations, which can include peer review, do not necessarily need to be identical for all teachers and principals each year. For example, the evaluations could be formative in nature one year and summative in the next year;
- Use data from teacher and principal evaluations to inform: the development and implementation of ongoing professional development; and decisions about compensation, promotion, and retention, tenure, and dismissal;
- Develop a plan to ensure equitable and fair distribution of effective teachers and principals; and
- Implement programs to provide ongoing, job-embedded support for school leaders and teachers and to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs.

### **Turning Around the Lowest-Achieving Schools**

Under Race to the Top and soon under Title I School Improvement Grants, states are encouraged to focus efforts on turning around the persistently lowest-achieving schools. The State is currently developing a list of such schools based on the federal definition listed in Attachment 2 of this letter and will provide it this week. Districts with these schools will be eligible for both Race to the Top funds and School Improvement Grants and are encouraged to use such funds in a concerted effort to strengthen student performance. In this effort the State intends to:

- Strengthen and build upon our statewide system of support;
- Provide supports and professional learning communities for helping LEA's choose turnaround strategies, building the capacity of existing and new school turnaround organizations; and
- Provide additional professional development and supports to participating districts and schools through statewide communities of practice, summits to focus on school transformation, and supports for school turnaround leaders.

If an LEA has schools that are identified as persistently lowest-achieving schools, the LEA must in turn agree to:

- Implement in the identified school(s) one of four turnaround options as specified in the Race to the Top application and School Improvement Grants for the persistently lowest-achieving schools: 1.) turnaround; 2.) restart; 3.) school closure; or 4.) transformation. (See Attachment 3 of this letter for a full description of each of these models, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education.)
- For all participating LEAs, document LEA turnaround efforts to assist low-performing schools

### **Supporting a State-Local Partnership for Implementing Race to the Top**

We see Race to the Top as an opportunity to truly redefine the State's role in education from one of compliance to one as a collaborative partner with LEAs to support the hard work required to improve California's schools. To this end, the State will also engage in work that will support this state-local partnership such as:

- Building statewide communities of practice through means such as strengthening online communities and face-to-face opportunities to share among districts and their partner organizations;
- Providing participating LEAs with additional programmatic and funding flexibility (contingent on passage of pending legislation) and encouraging LEAs to provide schools with flexibility and autonomy in areas such as staffing, budgeting, and/or extended learning time.

LEAs will in turn lead the State in the development of new knowledge and expertise and will:

- Engage in statewide communities of practice;
- Develop relationships with other LEAs to create mentor relationships,
- Collaborate with key partners as necessary; and
- Attend statewide or regional training opportunities to review progress and share promising practices around the four key assurance areas.

### **Additional Areas of Interest to the State**

Furthermore, while the activities listed below are not mandatory for participation in Race to the Top, they are priorities for the State and have evidence as important factors in raising student achievement and closing gaps. If your LEA is engaged in these activities and would be willing to partner with the State and other LEAs, we would encourage you to further commit to working in these key areas:

- Address Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) needs of students and staff by working with industry experts, museums, universities, research centers, and other STEM-capable community partners to:
  - Prepare and assist teachers in integrating STEM content across grades and disciplines;
  - Promote effective and relevant instruction; and
  - Offer applied learning opportunities for students;
- Explore innovative uses of technology to improve learning, especially focused on all types of differentiated instruction;
- Engage in a concerted effort to improve instruction for English learners, including building communities of practice and sharing promising practices;
- Improve the quality of early childhood education by helping students better transition between preschool and kindergarten;
- Build on afterschool programs and community partnership efforts as a means to increase learning time, especially among low-performing schools; and
- Develop multiple pathways for students in high school and additional Career Technical Education options.

### **Application Process**

Participating LEAs will need to sign an MOU that is contingent upon success in winning a Race to the Top grant (see Attachment I). The MOU includes signatures, assurances, and a checklist of commitments as a preliminary scope of work. If California wins a Race to the Top grant, LEAs will have 90 days to develop their final Scope of Work and submit their plans along with an accompanying budget. An LEA may decide to draft a plan that would focus only on a select number of schools within the LEA or can draft a



plan that would encompass all schools in the LEA, but the plan should have significant impact on strengthening education in the district. It is important to note that the total amount of funding for California will be based on the number of LEAs/schools participating. Further, the 50 percent of Race to the Top funding that must be allocated to LEAs will be based on the number of Title I eligible students participating.

While we understand one of the main questions that LEAs may ask is about the estimated amount of an LEA's Race to the Top award, it is very difficult for us to provide an accurate estimate of the amount for any individual LEA. We do know that if California wins this grant, the State could receive between \$350 million and \$700 million. In addition, we know that 50 percent of this money must be distributed to participating LEAs based on the Title I formula. Specifically, we must calculate the total amount of Title I generated by participating LEAs/schools; half of the Race to the Top funding will be allocated on the basis of the proportional amount each LEA receives of that total. However, because we do not know the total size of the final grant, nor the number of LEAs joining the effort, we cannot estimate an amount for individual participating LEAs. Therefore, we are only asking for you to complete the MOU and Exhibit I, the preliminary scope of work, at this time. Detailed plans and budgets will be developed in partnership 90 days after learning whether California wins a grant under this competition. Please also note that our intent is that any costs associated with implementation of the Race to the Top plan should be funded with Race to the Top funding, other federal funding, or any other discretionary funding source an LEA chooses to utilize in these efforts. It is also our intent to allocate all of the Race to the Top funding directly to LEAs or for statewide activities that directly benefit LEAs (such as in development of a formative assessment item bank.)

**If your LEA would like to participate in California's Race to the Top, please submit a statement of intent to apply by December 31, 2009 via e-mail to [info@caracetothetop.org](mailto:info@caracetothetop.org).** While the initial intent to apply e-mail is not binding, this will allow us to begin to compile necessary data for the application about participating LEAs.

**Then, please submit the signed MOU as a PDF by e-mail to [info@caracetothetop.org](mailto:info@caracetothetop.org) or via fax to the California Department of Education at 916-319-0100 by January 8, 2010.**

It is important to note that there is no competition between LEAs for participation in Race to the Top. If your LEA submits an MOU, signed by at least the LEA superintendent (or equivalent authorized signatory), and fully commits to the elements of the State plan, your LEA will be considered a participating member of California's Race to the Top.

For more information on Race to the Top, please visit California's official Race to the Top Web site at <http://www.caracetothetop.org>.

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We hope that this information provides you with enough information to hold conversations to determine your LEA's ability and desire to participate in Race to the Top. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact us with suggestions or questions by e-mail to [info@caracetothetop.org](mailto:info@caracetothetop.org). We hope you will consider joining this exciting opportunity.

Sincerely,



JACK O'CONNELL  
State Superintendent of Public Instruction  
California Department of Education



THEODORE R. MITCHELL  
President  
California State Board of Education



GLEN W. THOMAS  
Secretary of Education  
Office of the Secretary of Education

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